

## Opening Statement By Chairman Vernon J. Ehlers

Good morning ladies and gentleman. The Committee on House Administration will come to order.

Today the Committee meets to mark up H.R. 4844, the Federal Election Integrity Act of 2006.

Over the past few months, this Committee has received testimony from election experts, local officials and concerned citizens about the issues raised by this bill. We had hearings here in Washington, in Las Cruces, New Mexico and in Phoenix, Arizona on ID requirements and voting by non-citizens.

All views were represented at these hearings and they gave us valuable insights into the arguments for and against the proposals to require voters to show an ID at the polls. They also revealed some strong disagreements about the wisdom of imposing such a requirement. To some, this proposal is a simple, common sense proposal and a necessary safeguard against vote fraud. To others, it represents a dangerous threat to some citizens' ability to access the polls.

While this debate may be heated and ongoing in Washington, DC, it seems the American people have made up their mind. A recent NBC/Wall Street Journal poll showed that 81% of those surveyed favored an ID requirement for voting. Likewise, the bi-partisan Carter Baker Commission on Federal Election Reform recommended a national voter ID requirement in the report they issued last year. While the division on this issue may be partisan here in Congress, elsewhere it seems a large bi-partisan majority has concluded that requiring ID is a necessary reform.

The Committee has had H.R. 4844, the Federal Election Integrity Act, pending before it since Mr. Hyde introduced the bill in March of this year. Today I will offer a substitute amendment that makes some changes to the bill but preserves its fundamental feature - a requirement to prove citizenship and present identification to vote in federal elections in the United States. I want to thank Mr. Hyde for his leadership and his work on this important issue, and thank him also for working with us on making the changes contained in the substitute.

The substitute amendment has been provided to the Committee Members. I will now describe its provisions.

The amendment will require presentation of a government issued photo ID to vote in federal elections, effective November 2008. This extends the effective date of H.R. 4844 as introduced by two years. Though most of the voting public already has an ID that could meet this requirement, there is a percentage of eligible voters who do not have an ID so these extra two years will give them time to acquire it.

To ensure that only citizens are voting, the amendment will require presentation by 2010 of an ID that could not have been obtained without proving proof of citizenship. This replaces the requirement of proving citizenship at registration, with a requirement to prove citizenship when obtaining the ID. Once obtained, this ID can be used to prove both citizenship and identity when voting.

The Congress has previously enacted the REAL ID Act which will require people to prove their legal status in the country to get a REAL ID. That Act has to be implemented by May 2008. Citizens will be able to use the ID's they obtain under this process to vote in elections starting in 2010 and for all elections thereafter. The ID will have to include some indicia of citizenship, so poll workers and other election officials will be able to tell that the bearer is a citizen.

Pursuant to the amendment, those who arrive at the polls without an ID will be permitted to cast a provisional ballot. These ballots will be counted if the person returns and presents to an election official a qualifying ID within 48 hours.

To help those who need, but cannot afford, the ID to vote, the amendment requires States to provide them free of cost to the indigent, and authorizes funds to reimburse States for the costs of doing so.

I think these changes improve the bill and will make it easier to implement and easier for citizens to vote. Once implemented, we will have an important safeguard in place that will enhance the integrity of our system and help restore confidence in it. By putting in place procedures that ensure voting is limited to eligible citizens, we can encourage participation and increase turnout. The experience in Arizona is instructive here - despite all the claims that disenfranchisement would ensue after enactment of the proof of citizenship and ID requirements in Proposition 200, testimony in Phoenix revealed that registration went up 15% after the requirement to prove citizenship went into effect. The fact is, people are encouraged to vote when they believe that their vote will count, and their vote will not be cancelled out by an illegal vote.

I know there will be some who oppose the action we will take today and there will be some controversy generated by the proposal. I wish it were not so. It seems we should all be able to agree that voting should be limited to citizens of the United States, because that has been the law for years. If we can agree on that, we should be able to agree that our voting systems must have procedures in place to ensure it.

We should all be able to agree that every eligible citizen should be able to vote, to vote only once and to be assured that their vote will not be diluted by an illegal vote. If we agree on that, we should be able to agree that making people identify themselves when they vote is a simple and necessary safeguard.

Some members have told me that the ID requirement is too much trouble. But everyday millions of Americans show a picture ID to pay by check, board a plane, or buy alcohol or tobacco. Surely the sanctity of the ballot warrants as much protection as these other activities.

Our voting rights are too important to rely on an "honor system." We need to make sure we have procedures in place that protect the right to vote, and make sure only eligible citizens are able to do so.

I hope all members will recognize the need for these necessary reforms. They will advance the security of our electoral systems, increase confidence in their integrity and reduce the opportunities for fraud.

At this time, I would like to recognize the Ranking Member, Ms. Millender-McDonald, for any remarks she may have.